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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001440

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RUSSIA BAITS GEORGIA ON N. OSSETIA; NEXT STEPS

REF: MOSCOW 1407

Classified By: CDA Daniel A. Russell. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. On May 21, MFA officials reiterated Russian respect for Georgia's territorial integrity and said there was no plan to recognize South Ossetia's independence, or annex the republic, despite the May 20 appeal by North Ossetian President Mansurov for unification. The appeal, issued during an MFA-hosted conference, was not commented on by FM Lavrov at the conference or reflected in statements on the MFA website; however, Lavrov used his May 20 Duma testimony to blame Georgia for increasing tensions in the separatist territories and met later that day with Abkhaz "president" Bagapsh to discuss the situation in the zone of conflict. On May 21, Georgia's new Ambassador Kitsmarishvili described to us his strategy of quiet diplomacy, and interest in rebuilding trust and blunting Russia's campaign to paint Georgia as the aggressor. Acknowledging the poor MFA reception to Integration Minister Yakobashvili's visit, the Georgian Embassy is pressing for a Medvedev-Saakashvili meeting during June 7-8 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, with Kitsmarishvili personally supportive of a DFM Vashadze channel to the GOR. End summary.

Lavrov Pushes All Buttons

¶2. (SBU) FM Lavrov pushed Georgian buttons on Abkhazia and South Ossetia in May 20 testimony to the Duma, a set-piece meeting with Abkhaz "president" Bagapsh, and an MFA-hosted conference on North Ossetia. Before the CIS Committee, Lavrov focused on Georgian UAV violations of the 1994 Moscow Agreement, blamed Georgia for historically placing conditions on a no-use-of-force pledge, defended Putin's "instructions" on humanitarian grounds, attributed the increase in CIS peacekeepers to the need to prevent further Georgian provocations, and put the onus on Georgia to respond to Russian offers to improve bilateral relations. Noting Saakashvili's peace plan, Lavrov argued that Georgian militant actions on the ground belied its public diplomacy. Meeting with Bagapsh, Lavrov emphasized "ways to reduce tensions in the spirit of the UNSC resolutions and recommendations by the Friends' Group," reinforcing his previous message that Russia was not interested in changing the formats for Caucasus conflict resolution. After praising North Ossetia's successful experience of peaceful co-existence among 100 ethnic groups, Lavrov listened quietly to Republic President Mansurov's call for foreign support for the unification of North and South Ossetia (which South Ossetian "president" Edvard Kokoity echoed in a statement from Tskhinvali).

MFA Denies Backsliding

¶3. (C) In the wake of the Mansurov and Kokoity statements, both MFA Fourth CIS Deputy Director Dmitriy Tarabrin and Special Envoy for the South Ossetian Conflict Yuriy Popov reiterated Russia's continued respect for Georgian

territorial integrity. In response to our strong concerns over Mansurov's appeal, particularly in the context of an FM Lavrov-hosted event, Tarabin said that the GOR would neither recognize the two separatist territories, nor annex them. Tarabin defended Lavrov's participation in the program, noting that the MFA regularly hosted events to showcase Russian republics and North Ossetia deserved the Russian leadership's attention. Tarabin denied that Mansurov's comments had been scripted. (Note: MFA statements summarizing the conference have not included the Republic President's call for unification; nor, however, has there been any effort to officially distance Lavrov from the appeal.) Popov told us May 21 that Kokoity's statement led nowhere and nobody should be troubled by it. Noting that the GOR had done nothing to encourage Kokoity's remarks, Popov said that Russia's position on a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the territory remain unchanged.

New Energy at the Georgian Embassy

¶4. (C) On May 21, newly arrived Georgian Ambassador Erosi Kitsmarishvili previewed for us an ambitious plan to reach out to Moscow's elite to rebuild the lost trust between the two countries. Thanking the U.S. for its support, he said that Georgia's preference for Euro-Atlantic integration should not be news to the Russians, and Russia should opt for a stable non-Russophobic neighbor in the south. Noting the emotional nature of Russian-Georgian relations, and the Russian feeling of "betrayal," Kitsmarishvili said Georgia would have to do a better job advertising the fact that Russophobia did not dominate Georgian attitudes towards

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Moscow. Kitsmarishvili said that Georgia had made mistakes in its approach to Russia, but that he took up the challenging assignment to Moscow because he believed Saakashvili had grown in office. He expressed concern that many Russians, including DFM Karasin, erroneously connected the May 21 elections with mounting tensions in the zones of conflict.

¶5. (C) Diplomacy in the period after the Georgian parliamentary elections and the inauguration of Medvedev, Kitsmarishvili argued, could revitalize the political landscape, moving beyond the bad personal relations between Putin and Saakashvili that had dogged the bilateral relationship. Kitsmarishvili noted that Medvedev had not sought opportunities to comment on Georgia, which he considered to be "not necessarily a bad sign." Kitsmarishvili attributed the frosty MFA reception to Integration Minister Yakobashvili (reftel) to both the messenger and the fact that the new Russian government was still operating under "old instructions." Kitsmarishvili said he was pushing for a first meeting between Medvedev and Saakashvili in early June during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, which could reframe relations. Kitsmarishvili said he supported the idea of DFM Vashadze acting as a special envoy, whose Moscow schooling and Bolshoi ballerina wife would give him an entree and acceptability to Russian inner circles that the GOG should exploit.

¶6. (C) With the Georgian Embassy transformed into a voting station on May 21, Kitsmarishvili said his officers had not engaged with the MFA on the North Ossetian President's call for unification, but welcomed our message of concern.

Comment

¶7. (C) Kitsmarishvili struck us as a savvy operator, whose previous experience running Rustavi 2 television in Tbilisi appears to have contributed to a rolodex of Russian political and cultural figures. His more measured appreciation of Saakashvili, willingness to criticize aspects of Georgia's past tactics with the Kremlin, and entrepreneurial approach

to the strategic bottom-line may help open the door to a broader range of opinionmakers than his predecessor enjoyed. His support of a Vashadze channel strikes us as sound.

RUSSELL